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LIFE IN THE FAS LANE



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PRECISELY BECAUSE FAS IS SUCH A SMALL AGENCY, ACHIEVING SUCCESS REQUIRES DEDICATION AND COORDINATION FROM ALL PERSONNEL, FOREIGN AND CIVIL SERVICE ALIKE.

BY ED PORTER

espite its name, civil servants predominantly staff the Foreign Agricultural Service. In fact, Civil Service personnel account for approximately 70 percent of the nearly one thousand FAS employees. Foreign Service personnel (officers and administrative assistants) comprise only about 17 percent, while our dedicated Foreign Service National staff account for the remaining 13 percent.

FAS personnel serve in 70 agricultural offices around the world, covering almost 130 countries. Our smallest offices may be run by a single Foreign Service National without a resident FS officer, while the largest offices can

F O C U S

have up to five Americans and 10 FSNs. Wherever they are stationed overseas, in addition to their country-specific responsibilities, most FAS FS officers are responsible for their own personnel, budgets and procurement actions. As with State and the other foreign affairs agencies, a majority — over 60 percent — of FAS's Foreign Service personnel are stationed overseas at any given time.

Nearly all FAS FS officers assigned abroad have multiple-country responsibilities, unlike their State Department colleagues. This requires that they travel, often extensively, and report to several ambassadors, which can test the political savvy of even the most experienced officer. However, regional responsibilities permit FAS FS officers to develop a wider perspective on agricultural issues, which can be a tremendous benefit. In addition, it permits formation of a broad view of a range of other issues, including commercial and political developments.

While FAS FS officers move approximately every three to four years, FSN staff serve in the same office for their entire careers. For that reason, FSNs are the backbone of our agency's in-country institutional memory and experience.

A Diverse Mission

No matter where they are located or how they are staffed, all but a few agricultural offices have export promotion as one of their primary missions. Beyond that, the mix of responsibilities of an agriculture office varies greatly from post to post, though some FAS offices have relatively well-defined portfolios. For example, our offices in Geneva and Brussels cover the World Trade Organization and the European Commission and therefore focus almost exclusively on agricultural trade policy. Similarly, FAS offices located in major food-producing countries are heavily involved with reporting on key commodities and trade prospects; for example, the agricultural offices in

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Canberra and Buenos Aires keep track of developments involving these rivals of U.S. agriculture. Although the issues the FSOs track are often technical and sometimes sound arcane (What is avian influenza?), they can have a major economic impact on the U.S. agricultural sector.

Large posts with FAS contingents are especially versatile. In Moscow, the Office of Agricultural

Affairs (supported by branch offices in St. Petersburg and Vladivostok) issues more than 50 reports a year on local crop production alone. It also monitors and promotes a long list of trade policy issues, and runs a host of food aid and international cooperation programs.

This diversity of missions means that FAS Foreign Service officers may be called upon on any given day to: meet with a vice minister in the host country's Ministry of Agriculture regarding an agricultural policy issue; negotiate the release of a shipment of U.S. food products held by local port officials for any variety of reasons; submit a scheduled commodity report to FAS headquarters; meet with visiting U.S. business representatives seeking export opportunities; preside at the opening of the U.S. pavilion at a local food show; arrange the visit of a Forest Service delegation; facilitate the logistics of donated wheat shipments; collect insect samples from local fields for U.S. research programs; or challenge the scientific validity of a local quarantine-based import ban.

Whereas an overseas FAS FS officer must be a jack-of-all-trades, back in Washington, he or she is a specialist. Most headquarters staff work either as analysts or as marketing or trade policy specialists. A typical day for an analyst may include updating the official supply and demand forecasts for a specific commodity, while a marketing specialist might review marketing plans and funding requests from an FAS overseas office. A trade policy specialist may draft briefing papers in preparation for upcoming negotiations.

Because FAS FS officers normally are assigned to overseas tours of three to four years, they often are reluctant to accept short-term, TDY assignments. As a result, these opportunities primarily go to Civil Service employees, who wish to work overseas without com-

F O C U S

mitting to a career in the Foreign Service.

Hiring from Within

Perhaps the most significant difference between the Foreign Agricultural Service and most other Foreign Service agencies is the fact that we actually select our FS officers from within our own ranks. This is done through a unique process, called Lateral Entry, which generally takes approximately one year to complete, from application to overseas assignment. (In fact, it is how I entered the Foreign Service 15 years ago.)

To apply, an FAS employee must be in a career or career-conditional position, have worked 18 months in the Department of Agriculture (of which 12 months must have been in FAS), and be at the GS-11 grade or above at the time of application. Each FS candidate must com-

Though the FAS portfolio varies greatly from post to post, all but a few offices concentrate on export promotion.

plete an extensive application, including accomplishments in specified areas. Each application is reviewed by the FAS Qualifications Review and Evaluation Panel. This panel is comprised of five FS officers, ranging in rank from junior to Senior Foreign Service officers, of whom one is from outside the Foreign Agricultural Service. The QREP ranks all the applicants and recommends

the top qualifiers to the FS Board of Examiners. The Board of Examiners administers two exams, one written and one oral, and based on the results, selects the most qualified candidates for the Foreign Service.

Each year, approximately 10 to 15 FAS Civil Service employees apply for the Foreign Service and, on average, about half successfully complete the process. Successful candidates are offered a three-year, career-

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F O C U S

conditional appointment, subject to obtaining security and medical clearances. Individuals who are not selected for the Foreign Service may apply again the following year.

One advantage of this system is that individuals who fail to meet FS commissioning requirements are entitled to re-employment rights within FAS at their former GS level. They are not out on the street. Also, junior officers who, after serving one tour of duty overseas, decide that a Foreign Service career is not for them, may return to the ranks of the Civil Service at the GS grade at which they left. This allows productive employees with overseas experience to remain within our agency, thus benefiting our mission.

Forging a Partnership

Current relations between FAS Civil and Foreign Service employees are cordial and productive. This has not always been the case. In the past, differences between the two personnel systems, combined with the need to annually rotate FS officers back to headquarters each summer, led to heated disputes between management and the Civil Service and Foreign Service employee unions. Until about a decade ago, FS officers returning to headquarters were routinely assigned to a position with little fanfare. For example, often, an incoming officer followed an outbound officer into a position.

With the advent of an agency Partnership Council about 10 years ago came demands from Civil Service colleagues to change a system they perceived as covert and unfair. In response, the summer assignment process was opened to Civil Service employees who requested to rotate to a different position at the same grade or sought promotion to a higher grade. Thus was born the FAS Washington Placement Plan, or WPP as it is commonly known.

The early years of the WPP were difficult. Civil Service employees continued to push for expanded access to rotation and promotion opportunities on an annual basis. Foreign Service officers came to view the WPP as a means by which they were denied challeng-

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ing Washington assignments to accommodate a CS promotion or, worse, forced into positions below their grade (a situation CS employees are protected from) and thus possibly disadvantaged before selection boards.

Following several years of difficult negotiations, which at one point caused relations between the two services to plummet to rock-bottom, a compromise was reached a few years ago. While neither employee union is completely pleased with the final product, resolution of this issue has led to a significant improvement in relations between the two services. A review of the top 20 positions within the agency indicates that the WPP system appears to be working: the positions are evenly divided between FS and non-FS officers, including two positions held by political appointees.

Starting in the 2004 cycle, new regulations will require Civil Service personnel at the GS-14 and -15 levels to rotate to different jobs, if they have been in their current position for more than six years. This means senior positions, which would otherwise probably remain encumbered by Civil Service employees for years, will be available to FS personnel, those returning to headquarters and those already there.

Wherever they are located, FS and CS staff work together to carry out the two-prong mission of the Foreign Agricultural Service: to expand export opportunities for U.S. agricultural, fish and forest products, and to promote world food security. Carrying out this mission requires a combination of analytical, policy and marketing skills, as well as close working relations with other U.S. government agencies, state governments and organizations, U.S. and foreign private sector contacts, and foreign governments. And precisely because FAS is such a small agency, achieving success requires dedication and coordination from all personnel, in the Foreign and Civil Service alike.

Although they serve in the Department of Agriculture, FAS FS officers, like their colleagues in the other foreign affairs agencies, enjoy a unique lifestyle that offers significant challenges and rewards. To date, I have enjoyed the ride. I believe most of my colleagues feel the same way. ■